

TRANSITION from the Classroom to the Web: Successful Strategies for *Teaching Online*

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Faculty, especially those with limited background in the use of computers for academic purposes, often view the development and implementation of asynchronous online courses as an intimidating, formidable challenge. We have had several years of experience teaching web-enhanced and totally web-based courses in nursing and offer practical tips and evidence-based strategies to engage both teacher and learner actively and productively in online courses. The examples we provide are from courses using WebCT, but other online formats, such as Blackboard, have similar features.

PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT OF ONLINE COURSES Our understanding of generally accepted principles of managing online instruction are derived from the literature, selected websites, and lived experience (1-4). We have found the following principles to be effective in conducting online courses:

- Developing and managing online courses are time-intensive activities.
- Students and faculty must have clear communication guidelines.
- Engagement of the learner to promote active learning and community is essential in online instruction.
- Online learners benefit from clear assignment guidelines and deadlines.
- Online learners benefit from both individual and group activities.
- Immediate, relevant, and continuous feedback promote learning and satisfaction in online courses.

ABSTRACT Online courses are an integral part of nursing education programs. The responsibility for developing and teaching asynchronous online courses can be challenging, especially for neophyte educators. Two experienced educators discuss strategies for developing and enhancing selected aspects of asynchronous online courses. Practical, evidence-based aspects of designing, conducting, and evaluating web-based courses are presented. Examples from courses using WebCT are shown.

Frontloading Online Courses From experience, we have learned that several tasks must be attended to prior to beginning an online class. In preparing students, frontloading involves a clear description of the skills, hardware, and software that are necessary to ensure student success. Generally, learners are required to have access to computers with high-speed Internet connections. They must know how to generate, save, attach, and retrieve files, and they must have online access to databases and literature.

Orientation to using WebCT is available both through self-tutorial and in classes held on campus. Along with a list of equipment, students should be given a list of expectations and responsibilities.

Faculty also need adequate orientation and support. The initial investment in getting a course implemented online and ready for students may be greater and more time-intensive for faculty than traditional, in-person classes (5).

Certain course materials need to be loaded by the beginning of the semester, but we have found that assignments that are still in the process of development can be hidden from students until they are ready to be posted. In our institution, for example, students have access to WebCT courses a week before the semester begins. We make sure that they have access to the syllabus, a calendar with due dates, a description of assignments, and enough learning modules, or units of instruction, to be able to get a good idea of what will be required for the course. Especially important is a welcome announcement that begins the process of socializing students to the online environment. Rather than sending individual emails to all students, the welcome announcement, which applies to the entire class, can be posted on the announcement board.

Managing Several Online Courses Concurrently Under any circumstance, course management is complex. When the instructor is teaching multiple courses online, the complexity increases exponentially with the number of courses and as student enrollment grows.

It is our experience that multiple courses are best managed if both learners and teachers understand the preferred course communication methods. We ask our students who want to communicate with us to use the course email route. While a telephone message may be more personal, an email sent through the course email is more efficient and more likely to get a quick response. In addition, we ask our students to log into WebCT at least every other day to keep up with new communication. Most students report logging onto WebCT daily, if not twice a day.

The calendar feature of online courses is a valuable tool for teachers who are teaching multiple online courses and learners who are taking multiple online courses at the same institution.

A completed calendar, with due dates for all assignments and other relevant dates, can be a great asset in time management. Since we are involved in teaching multiple online courses, we rely on the calendar feature to help manage our schedules and provide timely input and feedback for all the assignments that are due.

A Modular Approach to Online Courses Without regularly scheduled classes, a mechanism that incorporates thoughtful flow and continuity of content throughout the semester needs to be in place. A modular approach, where content is divided into units of instruction, has been demonstrated to be an effective vehicle for delivering online courses. It is important that modules contain properly worded directions so that assignments can be completed accurately.

It is also important that students be actively involved in the learning process (6-8). Johnson and Aragon state that “powerful online learning environments need to contain a combination of these principles: (1) address individual differences, (2) motivate the student, (3) avoid information overload, (4) create a real-life context, (5) encourage social interaction, (6) provide hands-on activities, and (7) encourage student reflection” (9, p. 34).

Figure 1 illustrates the elements of an instructional unit for an online survey course in teaching and learning. Each unit contains a unit overview, objectives, student directions, readings, discussion questions (on the Discussion Board), and activities. The readings are electronically linked; learners can access them easily by simply clicking on the title. As shown in Figure 1, links are also built into websites that are listed; these contain learning style inventories that can be completed online with feedback to the learner.

Regardless of how the modules are written, they should be logical, linked to appropriate resources (rather than have learners go elsewhere to access relevant materials), and consistent with the focus of the content. If the intent of the module is to teach learners about learning styles, having inventories, or instruments they can complete with feedback, is critical.

Depending on the credit allotment of the course, there should be sufficient modules built to cover the course objectives. Required work from learners should be consistent with the credit allotment, and the emphasis should be on activities that are meaningful to accomplishing course objectives. Readings and other weblinks need to be carefully selected to avoid redundancy and minimize overload for the learner.

Personalizing Online Participants One of the criticisms students and faculty acknowledge with online courses is that per-

Figure 1. Elements for an Online Instructional Unit

UNIT 1. OVERVIEW OF LEARNING THEORY AND LEARNING STYLES

This unit focuses on basic knowledge underlying the role of the advanced practice nurse in teaching patients, clients, families, and peers. Also, the learner has an opportunity to compare and contrast several learning theories and learning style theories and to complete a learning style inventory. Individual ways of learning are compared with ways of learning by others in the class.

OBJECTIVES:

The learner will understand historical, societal, and legal factors that underscore the need for preparation in the teaching function of the nurse.

The learner will define principal constructs of several learning theories.

The learner will compare and contrast several learning style theories.

TO COMPLETE THIS UNIT:

Complete the readings as assigned.

Submit an annotated bibliography of a reading of your choosing relevant to this unit.

Complete the learning style activity.

Respond to the discussion questions as posted.

READINGS:

Bastable, S. B. (2002). *Nurse as educator: Principles of teaching and learning for nursing practice*. Chapters 1-4.

Benzie, D. (2000). Teaching and learning styles. *Community Medical Education*, 6(1).

Bogod, E. (2003). Learning styles and multiple intelligence.

Brookfield, S. (1995). Adult learning: An overview. In A. Tuijnman (1995). *International Encyclopedia of Education*.

ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY:

There are three websites attached. Each has a learning style inventory.

Take one or all three learning style inventories to gain an understanding of or a review of your own learning style.

<http://ttc.coe.uga.edu/surveys/LearningStyleInv.html>

www.usd.edu/trio/tut/ts/stylest.html

www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html

After completing the learning style inventories, go on to the Discussion Board.

sonal, face-to-face contact is missing. In a traditional classroom, participants observe one another as class proceeds. Building community, especially in an asynchronous online course, can be a real challenge (8). If video technology is not used regularly, students may only know their peers by the written word.

A technique to add a face for each class member is to have learners create their own PowerPoint slides featuring either a still picture or video and a brief, two- to three-sentence description about themselves as a person, not necessarily as a student. The instructor can then create an entire PowerPoint presentation, featuring all the students, and post it within the course. The instructor may also want to include his or her picture along with some personal information.

Setting Assignment Deadlines The Assignment Dropbox is an online feature that allows learners to submit documents electronically. Depending on how the schedule for assignments is configured, learners are informed from the outset that there are specific days of the week and specific times that assignments are due. Consistency in date and time are keys to encouraging learners to submit online assignments on time. For example, Tuesdays at 11:00 PM may be the assigned day and time for students in Course A to submit assignments using the Assignment Dropbox, while students in Course B must submit their assignments on Thursdays at 11:00 PM. Such consistency is helpful for students who are taking multiple online courses. In planning the day and time, the teacher must be careful to avoid a conflict with the server's daily update.

Providing Feedback with Online Assignments A rule of thumb that we follow in giving feedback to students for assignments submitted online is that the feedback will also be provided online. For assignments that are only a few pages in length, are easy to read, and require minimal or standardized feedback, instructional rubrics are a good mechanism for providing feedback. A rubric is a written form that contains the essential elements of the assignment and allows the instructor to rate the work on each element. Having an instructional rubric for grading helps clarify the purpose and critical elements of the assignment for both the instructor and the learner (10).

For essay assignments that may be several pages in length, instructional rubrics are appropriate along with handwritten feedback on the downloaded document. We download the assignment to a hard copy, make handwritten corrections on the paper itself, and then convert the paper to a PDF file that we return to the learner electronically.

Creating a PDF file of the graded paper has two primary advantages: 1) The teacher is able to make comments directly on the paper and does not have to create feedback using a word processing program, and 2) the learner is assured that the document has been read by the teacher. Handwritten comments from the teacher have been shown to be effective in communicating the personal and individualized feedback that students want. This humanizes the feedback, even if it is delivered electronically (11).

Building Thoughtful and Provocative Discussion Questions

When face-to-face discussions, such as would occur in a seminar, are not possible, discussion questions must be thoughtful, creative, and occasionally whimsical. Questions should incorporate course materials and require critical thinking and reflection. Online discussions provide an excellent way to elicit contributions from learners who may be reluctant to participate in live seminar discussions. Several publications and websites provide good advice for creating and maintaining online discussions (8,12-16).

Engaging learners can be accomplished by posing provocative, thoughtful questions that promote discussion among students. Questions should be posed at the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels of thinking. For example, in one discussion item, learners might be asked to think about how an iceberg is analogous to the instructional development process. Learning about icebergs is central to making this connection.

With discussions, a skill that often comes with trial and error is learning when to step in and when to let students carry on the interaction without teacher input. If the teacher enters a discussion too early, the participants may believe that discussion on the topic is finished. If the teacher delays, there may be an impression that the discussions are not being monitored. Strategic planning, balance, and creativity are imperative for encouraging and supporting the collaborative environment that should characterize effective discussions.

In large classes, students should be divided into groups of five to six students for the entire term. In that way, group discussions are easier to manage and the number of peers with whom students have to interact is limited. Besides promoting more complete and thorough discussions, small discussion groups are also effective for the assignment of group papers.

Even though most of our experience has been with teacher-generated discussion items, we have moved to a model where learners are required to generate the discussion items, post them, and provide feedback for peers. Here, the teacher serves in the role of facilitator and coach. A recent example of a question posed by a

student was the following: “Should nurse educators be required to have several years of clinical experience before entering graduate school to become nurse educators? Support your response from the literature.”

Using Reflective Journaling An online course provides an ideal opportunity for having learners use reflective journaling. Kessler and Lund (17) address the benefits of reflective journals and offer guidelines for their use.

For graduate students enrolled in precepted courses, the journal is an excellent medium for communicating with the course instructor who is not present during the practicum. The journal is a communication document between faculty and learner; the preceptor does not have access to the journal unless the learner gives permission.

Usually journals are submitted electronically once weekly using a prescribed template. The template allows learners to report on what has occurred in the practicum during the previous week, to reflect on what they have been reading, and to connect the literature with the lived experience. Journals can also be submitted as a continuing document; the student makes subsequent entries after receiving teacher feedback on the prior week’s entry. Teacher comments are submitted electronically on the journals and are highlighted in a recognizable color (usually yellow). Turnaround time for reading the journal entry and providing feedback should be no more than two days so that the student can incorporate faculty feedback in the next journal entry.

The journal also provides a place for students to account for the time spent in the practicum since there is a minimum requirement of 60 contact hours per semester. Figure 2 presents an example of an excerpt from a learner’s reflective journal. The teacher’s comments are in italics.

Peer Evaluation of Teaching in Online Courses Peer evaluation of teaching is a generally accepted criterion for retention, promotion, and tenure in nursing programs. Online courses offer a unique opportunity for both formative and summative evaluation. Evaluation comments by a colleague provide the opportunity for ongoing course and faculty development through evaluation of evidence-based pedagogy, organization and development of course content, and timing and completeness of learner feedback on assignments and discussions (18).

When peer evaluation is used, it is important that the individual who is evaluating the course have experience with teaching/learning theory, the content of the course, and online teaching. Unlike a normal peer evaluation activity where the evaluator takes a snap-

Figure 2. Sample Reflective Journal

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE JOURNAL

DATE	2/13/06
TIME	3.5 hours
CUM HOURS	30.25
ACTIVITY	1 hour setting up classroom/preparing for teaching experience 2 hours = classroom 30 minutes = debriefing with XXXX
INSIGHTS	<p>Now to the business at hand: I want to begin with the issue of horizontal violence hanging over from last week.</p> <p>In the reading assignments of the last couple of weeks, one of the emerging themes (among others) is the increasing amount of content volume due to advances in knowledge, and the controversy surrounding the issue of how best to assimilate the content throughout the curriculum. (My preceptors are also struggling with this issue.) Tanner suggests in her editorial, "Curriculum for the 21st Century..." that "covering" the content may have a paradoxical effect from its intended purpose, and may have a literal fulfillment. She advocates areas where educators should focus their efforts. One of those is ethical decision-making. Now, I assume she is suggesting ethical decisions in the context of nursing experiences. However, cross-over application is appropriate. Teaching digital citizenship should be a part of the educator's arsenal, especially in light of the increasing role of computer technology in education. (It should begin in elementary school.) <i>I believe it probably does.</i></p> <p>According to DeWitt-Heffner, students may not always transfer what they know to be morally acceptable behavior to the online world (2001). Moral sensitivity (the ability to recognize moral implications) and moral judgment (the ability to decide if a course of action is morally correct) are both skills which can be taught through education.</p> <p>Moral sensitivity and moral judgment are both crucial behaviors to master when providing culturally competent and caring nursing care. Therefore, the implications are appropriate to address in a nursing curriculum. A discussion about ethical behaviors should include horizontal violence toward peers and staff members, online and otherwise. This content is a worthwhile, necessary inclusion if even at the exclusion of teaching the genetics of hemophilia.</p> <p>In an ideal setting, knowledge and education would cure the problem. However, realism suggests otherwise. And in the case of a few students where the behavior continues, I think revisiting the issue in a classroom discussion would be appropriate. If there is another incident beyond that, appropriate legal and disciplinary action should be taken.</p> <p>DeWitt-Heffner, J. (2001). Defining the limits: Cyberethics. Retrieved on Feb. 8, 2006 at www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/27/b2/c5.pdf</p> <p>Tanner, C.A. (1998). Curriculum for the 21st century — Or is it the 21-year curriculum? <i>Journal of Nursing Education</i>, 37(9), 383-384.</p> <p><i>I appreciate your discourse above. If it stimulates you to think about the issues of how to handle similar situations in the future, that's good. Also thanks for the reference on cyberethics. I'll read the manuscript. One of the major differences between the electronic word and the hard copy word is that one has the opportunity to think about delivering the hard copy. With electronic media, all one has to do is push the send or post button and it's difficult to get it back, even if 5 minutes later things change.</i></p>

shot of the teacher, with online course materials the entire photo album is available for review. As this may be threatening to faculty, who may already be uncomfortable with the prospect of being evaluated by colleagues, it is important to emphasize that the purpose of the evaluation is constructive, not punitive. A standardized peer evaluation instrument that has been adapted for review of online courses should be used. As with all evaluation activities, peer evaluation of courses should be voluntary, and opportunities for mentorship should be available to the instructor whose course is being evaluated.

Bringing It All Together A course is more than the sum of its components. This is especially true with online courses. The assignments and activities have to fit together as a unified whole, not only to meet the goals and objectives of the course, but to provide a sense of connectivity. With online courses, there is greater danger of compartmentalization and fragmentation than may be evidenced with classroom courses.

Planning for effective interaction among all aspects of the online encounter results in a positive educational experience

for both the teacher and learner. These comments from learners support the value of effective teaching in an online course and shed light on what is important to students: “The course materials were easy to navigate and the readings were excellent. Assignments were varied and relevant.” And “[The instructor] painted a very distinctive and well-detailed picture with each unit. She complemented the units with relevant assignments that help me to internalize the information.”

Online courses can be effective and engaging for learners. By mastering some basic online techniques, the developer can build a successful course that is designed to optimize learning and facilitate faculty productivity. NLN

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